

Pedro's Patter.

Excerpt from Jeff's book – [Wallaby Airlines](#).

Epilogue Xinh Loi, Vietnam.

After 12 long months flying Caribous with Wallaby Airlines in Vietnam, I was on my way home. When I left Australia, I felt apprehensive about my reactions to war. Now, as our Qantas jet whispered on over the gigantic landmass of Australia, I wondered how I would handle peace. My wife and I had lived apart after a very short time together, she in normal circumstances and I in a totally military environment where everything, even one's free time, revolved around the flying program. Where dress was either a flying suit or second-best casuals. Where there were few rules except the requirement to get the job done. Where money had no value except for buying beer and toothpaste. Where Australia was as far away as Brazil.



I realised we would have to get to know one another again. I would have to learn to live like an ordinary person again. I felt like an impostor in the freshly dry-cleaned suit that I had not worn for 12 months, my suntan incongruous in the cold winter weather. Looking over the heads of the milling crowd, I saw Robyn waiting for me, fashionably elegant in a purple overcoat with a close-fitting muffler collar. The white poodle I had given her to keep her company while I was away lay contentedly and possessively across her crooked arm. What would I say to her that would truly show her how glad I was to be back, even though the turmoil of the last 12 months was still very much in my mind? We embraced, awkwardly at first, then more passionately. It was good to feel the security of belonging to a person instead of an organisation.

After customs and immigration formalities, we drove home saying little, she trying to read my thoughts, me looking for things to tell her outside the all consuming topic of life in Vietnam. Vietnam was thousands of miles distant, but in my mind it was only hours away, as it is even now. For a long time, I tried not to think about Vietnam. It was an experience shared with a group of colleagues, a few close friends, the rest merely working acquaintances, which bore absolutely no relationship to my real world. The trouble with Vietnam was that only a handful of people wanted to talk about it. None of my Air Force colleagues who had not been there were particularly interested. To civilian friends and acquaintances, Vietnam was an aberration, which had no



importance in their lives at all. They just did not want to know. Somehow we expected more from our neighbours.



After the indifference came outright opposition to any military involvement, especially the use of conscripts. There were street marches and anti-Vietnam rallies led by politicians. Even for permanent servicemen like me, expected to go anywhere at any time for any reason, the controversy was unsettling and demoralising. It must have been even more so for the conscripts.

Vietnam would not go away. The daily news, at first a trickle of reports on the Tet Offensive and its aftermath, broadened to a stream of garbage about the peace accords and the phoney politics of 'Vietnamisation'. It finally became a flood of gut-wrenching accounts of the collapse of the South and the ignominious departure of the last guarantors of so-called anti-Communist freedom. Then came the pitiful flight of the boat people, who braved cyclones, pirates and disease to deliver themselves to the countries that had promised them such freedom.

By 1976, the year after the end of the war, I was no longer in the Air Force. My family and I were living in the affluent eastern suburbs of Melbourne when the first waves of boat people reached Australia. Refugees were once again filling the migrant reception centres around the country, except now they were from Asia, not Europe. The churches began to encourage their congregations to help resettle refugee families. I broached the subject with Robyn and then persuaded our local church community to sponsor a family. Our parish priest was a humane and kindly man, and he and an embarrassingly small number of people offered tangible support to the project. Since it was my idea, I had to do all the legwork which, of course, I did not mind. The archdiocese supplied me with a contact number at the migrant hostel at Maribyrnong, and I was soon discussing with the management there how to go about helping a Vietnamese family.



A disarmingly simple process was used to select our family, as I found when I met them. Huyen Nha, the husband, had responded to a notice placed on a noticeboard, since he was one of the few residents of the hostel able to read English. In spite of a little apprehension about how we would relate to them, our family turned out to be easy people to like, though the introductions were a little awkward. Nha spoke halting English, his wife Hoa spoke none. They had three small daughters. I later met Nha's younger brother Huyen Ho, single and already settled in a flat and a good job with a computer company. He spoke excellent English, having served as a radar mechanic with a USAF unit at Tan Son Nhut. Ho helped out when communication became a little difficult and told me the family story.

Nha had been a PT boat captain in the Vietnamese Navy, and would not have lasted long under the Communists. The Huyens were living in Saigon when the North Vietnamese tanks smashed down the gates of the Presidential Palace. Nha knew that they had to get out. Over the next few months, though everyone with connections to the previous regime was under suspicion, he managed to accumulate funds by quietly selling family possessions. When the time was right, he moved his family down to Tra Vinh in the Delta. In this out-of-



the-way place he could pay people to look the other way, buy a boat, and escape with Ho and the family. Good plan.

I made other visits to the hostel while we got the parish program organised. Nha told me they were well treated at the hostel but found the food very hard to take. Shepherd's pie and Irish stew were obviously not on the regular Vietnamese menu. They were not complaining but it was obvious that, for once, they would dearly love to cook their own food. At Robyn's suggestion we brought them over to our house for a visit. Ho came along too to help with the conversation. Hoa was thrilled when Robyn, who had judiciously purchased some ingredients from an Asian supermarket, let her cook a Vietnamese-style meal in our kitchen. We eventually settled the Huyen family into a humble but habitable house in an industrial suburb, paying the bond and the first month's rent, as recommended by the church, from parish funds. We also put together a houseful of furniture donated by parishioners willing to help. The school ran a program for the children to bring food items to make up a hamper, since Christmas was coming.

When I visited the Huyens to drop in the hamper, Nha invited Robyn and me to their house for, as he put it, 'Christmas Dinner'. Of course, I accepted, realising they wanted to repay us for their visit to our house and the actions of the parish. The dinner date was set a few days before Christmas. When we arrived, I noticed for the first time a crucifix on the wall of their family room. Since I knew they were Buddhists, I was touched by this gesture of friendship. Hoa excelled herself with the cooking, refusing to sit down until everyone else had eaten—the Vietnamese



way. When Robyn asked what a family in Vietnam would eat on a special occasion such as this, thinking, no doubt, of our tradition of turkey and ham, Ho replied simply: 'This is it'.

The Huyens were ecstatically happy in their rented house, except for one thing. Nha was a proud man and was unhappy about not having a job. Although our congregation probably contained more corporate executives than many parishes, appeals from our church pulpit failed to find a job for Huyen Nha. He finally gave up on us. After doorknocking businesses in nearby suburbs, he got a job for himself servicing machinery in a rope factory. This reinforced my opinion of the pride and resourcefulness of the Vietnamese people. He even enrolled in an evening Italian course so he could communicate better with his fellow workers. (He was then the only Vietnamese among a workforce of Italians and Yugoslavs in the factory.)

We saw the Huyens regularly for several years, finally losing touch when we moved from Melbourne and they moved house. I have since tried to analyse my motives for this project at a time when most of my friends and neighbours did not want to know about Vietnam and many people were spreading stories about refugees disguising their wealth and smuggling in gold. My feeling is that we somehow let these people down after promising them freedom, then abandoning their cause. I am not talking about corrupt politicians, but people like the Huyens.

What happened to you, Vietnam? Are your rice paddies and green hills peaceful now, or do men still ravage your timeless beauty and disturb your serenity? What happened to your cities and buildings, beautiful Dalat, fragile Hue, Nha Trang and its Buddha? And where are your people?

I left no loved ones in Vietnam, but I did care about the local people around us, Missy Lanh, Missy Kim and the other girls from the Villa, Xuan, our smiling self-conscious typist, Charlie from the hangar, the bargirls, coolies and peasants. Why did they not triumph? Was it our fault or theirs? Was our effort worth anything at all, or was the end inevitable as many people said?



What happened to me, Vietnam? In 12 months, I doubled my flying experience and flew the most interesting and challenging flights of my career, past and future. My professional competence was enhanced in a way not possible under peacetime conditions. I learnt a little more of life, more of organisations, more about people, more about myself. But I lost something too. I gave you a year of my life. You called and I responded, not because of any moral commitment to your cause, but because a professional military man would never do otherwise. Even knowing what I know now, I would have gone anyway. And like a jilted lover I still care and wonder what might have been had the end been different. The Vietnamese expression 'Xinh Loi' translated into English means something like 'sorry about that' or 'that's life'. But the translation is inadequate. The sad but knowing eyes, the half-smile, the slight shrug of the shoulders, the way Lanh would say it in her singsong voice; these are lost in the translation. 'Xinh Loi, Vietnam'.

And then she asked "What's the best form of birth control after 50". I said "Nudity".



Wallaby Crew L-R: Blue Campbell, Ian Baldwin, Stew Bonett, Jeff Pedrina.

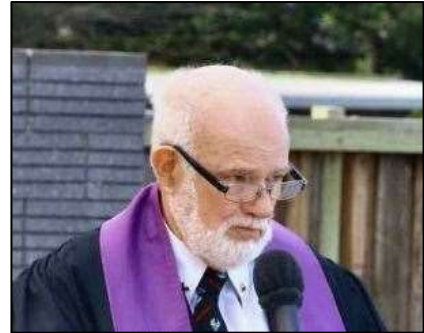
**What do we learn
from cows, buffalos
and elephants??**

**It's impossible to
reduce weight by
eating green grass
and salads and
walking.**



Arthur Fry

At the very outset of my ramblings, may I congratulate Jeff Pedrina for all the years he has written his column on Page 12. Since June 2015, Jeff has based his column on excerpts from his book 'Wallaby Airlines' and has taken us to many places and opened many doors in our memory that we either had forgotten or perhaps, never seen. So, thank you, Jeff, for your years of 'Pedro's Patter' which gave us a great inside to your incredulous career in the Royal Australian Air Force and other side issues pertaining to that great adventure.



I trust I can 'whet the whistle of those readers who turn to Page 12 in every edition and now find the column written by a different bloke, and for that reason, I had better explain who I am, for those who never knew me at Radio School, or those who had intentionally forgotten me, my welcome to you as your eyes view this column every three months, is still the same, although, I know, I know, I do have big boots to fill after reading what Jeff has offered you over these past five plus years.

I find it amusing that when Jeff first wrote for our Radio School Magazine before he began his column, in December 2014, he wrote under the topic, "[How About a Cuppa](#)". (That's it. I see you all turning up December 2014's issue to read "How about a Cuppa?") In this introductory edition written by me of RAM 'Page 12', I will be exposing the fact of who I am and how I came to Trevor Benneworth's notice, or rather, how I stuck my nose in his face to be offered this great opportunity to show my Shakespearean skills.

Trevor and I have met often in my role with the Vietnam Veterans of Australia Association, Sunshine Coast branch, where I have had a column in our monthly magazine, [Ricochet](#), over these past several years. Trevor and I run into each other at many functions and he does do a great job on reporting not just Radio School events but all functions held by military and ex-military organizations, six of which I am proud to say that I am a member. You'll hear about my six ESO's as times goes on.

At the Vietnam Veterans' Day luncheon with Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia, Sunshine Coast branch luncheon, in Maroochydore RSL, Trevor was there covering our event; we talked, and the result was what you are reading now.

Like Jeff, who wrote "Wallaby Airlines", I have written about my life story in my autobiography, "Grandad, You're a Legend!" Please don't rush out to the bookstores to buy a copy as it is still in the final stages of being proof-read by my eldest granddaughter, a High School teacher on the Gold Coast, who is scanning the five hundred and thirty-two page odyssey, I mean 'book', currently only on CD, for grammatical and spelling errors, (I don't always trust 'Spell Check'). Most importantly, Bethany is scanning my book to avoid unwanted lawsuits for defamation about me. Let's face it, no one can complete almost twenty-six years in the Air Force and not ruffle a few feathers and whatever I've written, true or half-true, fact or fiction, or simply an 'Arthur-ism', any mention of a particular incident where maybe feathers were ruffled, and if Page 12 may bring



that episode back to life, the next thing I know, I will be facing the second defamation case in my career.

Where did I find such a non-self-aggrandising name for my autobiography? For the first few years of its life, my manuscript was called, "Sit Back and Be Bored". I was sitting on the Queensland Civil and Administrative Tribunal in Maroochydore Court one day with my regular President of the Tribunal, Michael Francis, an esteemed accountant and lawyer whose father-in-law, Al Green, flew in Canberra, Phantoms and F-111's during his Air Force career, when, in talking about my book, suggested that "Sit Back and Be Bored" was too miniscule a title for a book that held 'such treasures and pearls of wisdom' that he suggested a new and more appropriate title. Over the past five years, we happen



to while away our quiet hours between cases, (Minor Civil Disputes Under \$5,000,) with every topic under the sun, but mainly Australian Defence Force yarns, in particular, the Air Force.

Christmas 2018 saw my wife and I share celebrations with our youngest daughter, Paula, and her family in Bridgman, some twenty kms east of Singleton. Her two sons, Max and Cooper, gave me a coffee cup as a symbol of their great respect for their grandfather, (I think all grandfathers in the district may have received similar mugs!) While sitting on my veranda sipping my coffee one morning from that mug, Michael's words reverberated in my mind and I imagined that a change to the title of my book, should be "Grandad, You're a Legend." I told this thought to Michael on our next regular meeting up at the Maroochydore Court and he gave his nod of approval to the change.

No amount of guilt can solve the past and no amount of anxiety can change the future.

My book is laid out in the format of William Shakespeare's 'As You Like It'. In the play, Jacques quotes 'The Ages of Man' is in seven stages, at first 'the babe', then follows those seven stages through to 'the School Boy' and then 'The Solder' (read, 'Airman and Air Force Officer,) then 'The Lover', (in which I write, 'This will be the shortest chapter in the book!') Then "The Justice", and as I've been a 'Justice' for thirty years, that part follows true.

I've been a Justice of the Peace, then by examination, I qualified as a Justice of the Peace (Qualified), then five years ago after further study, I was appointed as a Justice of the Peace, Queensland Civil and Administrative Tribunal (Non-Legally trained), (JP QCAT). Wow, if ever Jacques or William Shakespeare was homing in on a future living person, it was me! I'll leave



his later personalities of 'his Shrank Shrunk' and 'Mere Oblivion - sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything' to the reader's imagination!

Over the oncoming months, I trust I can show the readers of RAM the bases and experiences of my life in the RAAF, firstly as a radio Mechanic Trainee then a Radio Mechanic in the field, then a student of languages for the remainder of my RAAF career, through the eyes of this (Legendary) Grandfather,(and great-grandfather to seven children,) if only in two of my four grandsons' eyes, and in the picture portrait of Shakespeare's Jacques.

Mt Course, 27 RMC



Back Row L-R: Bruce Warring, R King, ? Ball, G Stephens, Tim Gear, G Monteith.

Middle Row L-R: Bob Jordan, Arthur Fry, Keith Fletcher, Noel Fenton, Ian Simper, Don't Know.

Front Row L-R: Joe Wilson, ? Watts, Don't know.



In this my first episode on Page 12, allow me to quote from my book, and introduce the very first principle I learned in the Air Force, that of "Great coats on; great coats off".

My preliminaries appeared to have been all completed, so I'll leave that section out of this story. I received a letter in the Australian Post mail advising me to report to the Recruiting Centre in Brisbane on Monday morning the 22nd August 1960. Bright eyed and bushy-tailed, I farewelled my mother and set off by tram into Brisbane, carrying my battered old cardboard suitcase with every



item I considered I'd need notwithstanding the new uniforms that would be awaiting me. On arrival at the Recruiting Centre in Mary Street, I soon discovered two other young men, also carrying not so battered suitcases, who had obviously received a similar letter from the Department of Air as it was in those days. We three were brought quickly back to the present when we were queried why we had brought our suitcases. We found out that we were not going to be attested that day, but the letter should have stated that the Director of Air Force Health wanted to select a sample of the recruits coming in at that time, and the primary reason to be at the recruiting Centre on that date was to be transported to Amberley so that this medical assessment could be completed.

The three of us humped our worldly goods in an RAAF bus from the Recruiting Centre to Amberley; completed the required testing then we were taken to the Airmen's Mess for lunch, and driven back to Mary Street Recruiting Centre from whence I dragged my battered cardboard suitcase home by tram, then up the front stairs to knock on my mother's front door.

A most surprised mother let me in and enquired why I should be returning so soon after her goodbyes that morning and the assurance that she had seen the last of me for a while. It would take a little longer to learn about the phenomena, "Great coats on; great coats off", but two days prior to my attestation, I had certainly come to understand the principle. Someone knew what the deal was that day. We three innocent young recruits all could not have misunderstood to come prepared for departure to Recruit Training Unit by bringing all our worldly chattels, when all that was required was a pre-enlistment medical check to monitor the health standards of current recruits.

Until next edition, when I'll dive into my autobiography and take you on the journey with me, as I leave on a south-bound non-sleeper train for Awaba, as Mister Fry from the Royal Exchange Assurance and arrive at Rathmines as "Hey, you!"



First the Lord made man in the Garden of Eden.
Then said to himself, "There's something he's needin'"

After casting about for a suitable pearl,
He got to work and created a girl.

Two beautiful legs, so long and so slender,
Round and slim and ever so tender.

Two lovely hips to increase his desire,
And rounded and firm to bring out the fire,

Two lovely breasts, so full and so proud,
Commanding his eyes, as he whispers aloud.

Two lovely arms, just aching to bless you,
And two loving hands, to soothe and caress you.

Soft, cascading hair hung over her shoulder,
And two dreamy eyes, just to make him grow bolder.

Twass made for a man, and it made his heart sing,
Then he added a mouth and ruined the damn thing.